Santa Clara County Flora and Fauna

The Lesser Animals of Santa Clara County

By Albert E. Johansson

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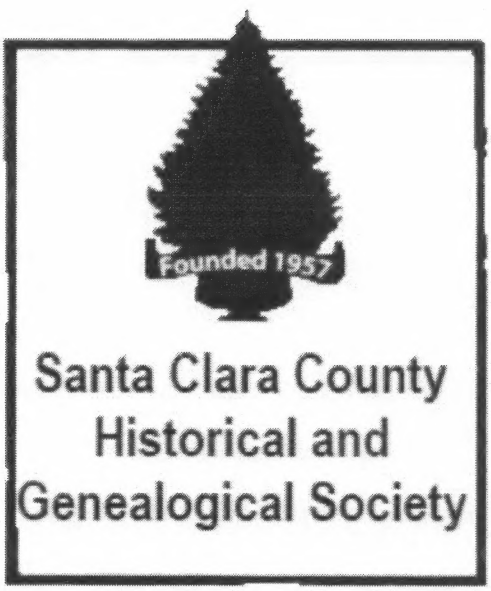
Circa 1936

Notes:

- Original in possession of the Santa Clara County Archives, San Jose, California
- Scanned by the Santa Clara County Historical and Genealogical Society



Albert E. Johansson
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Santa Clara County, California

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In the Eocene epoch of geologic time Santa Clara Valley and the mountains that now surround it were probably beneath the surface of the sea. Marine deposits and extensive chalk beds are to be seen to this day in the Santa Cruz range. This condition of submergence may have extended into Pliocene times, but it is quite certain that the three conditions necessary for the existence of mammals--an adequate food supply, safe breeding places, and refuges from enemies--made themselves apparent here at a not much later date.

This later date may have witnessed the existence of the same forms of life that were once found in similarly climated parts of California. These were a primitive horse, the mastodon, the mammoth, giant sloths, and a form of camel. The Tapir may also have lived here. Most interesting of these old mammals was the giant sloth, the Megatherium, first named by President Jefferson from a sample jaw bone found in an eastern cave early in the nineteenth century. It was longer than an elephant. He thought it a bone from a huge lion measuring more than twenty feet, but not equalling it in shoulder height. It has been hazarded that these beasts sometimes weighed more than five thousand pounds. They possessed a remarkable heavily built sternum to uphold the tremendous mass of their viscera when they assumed an upright posture to crop the leaves of the trees that were their food.

The extinction of the giant life of ancient times

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has been laid to various causes--to disease, to climatic changes, and to man (this last is true in such recent animals as the American Elk and the Prong-horned Antelope. These two have not been hunted in California for more than twenty years and disappeared from this county long before that time). Henry Fairfield Osborn gives the following reasons for the extinction of animal groups:

1. Over-crowding and enforced migration
2. Changed conditions of breeding
3. Diminished herds
4. Disturbance in the period of mating
5. New competition with new enemies
6. Heredity and deforestation

Harold Child Bryant of the University of California calls these "a host of indirect reasons."

It seems strange to make a sudden transition from the giant animals of old times to the minor forms that inhabit the valley today, but it is a necessary transition because of the paucity of fauna now existing due to the changed conditions.

The Pocket Gopher, probably the most thoroughly hated animal in the county, is a small, tawny red mammal with short ears, tiny eyes, short, almost hairless tail. It has cheek pouches which open outside--very useful in digging and carrying seeds. Ten inches is the maximum length they

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attain. As a rodent it possesses long and sharp incisors which many a dog has found at the expense of a torn lip or cheek, for the Pocket Gopher is not a coward when its life is at stake and will lie back on its haunches, squealing a shrill battle cry and gnashing at anything that comes within reach. This Gopher might even be called a savage animal, for two coming into unpremeditated contact will often fight to the death. What makes it such a pest to the farmer is the fact that it devours vegetable crops, the roots of fruit trees, and grain. The habit it has of throwing up hillocks of earth around its burrows is ruinous to meadows. In a place, such as Santa Clara County, where irrigation is necessary to the welfare of crops, the animal destroys irrigation checks and ditches by tunneling through them. The farmers combat the Gopher menace by the use of various sorts of traps, gas, and poison. Their natural enemies are the weasel and Gopher-snake. This latter occurs plentifully throughout the valley.

The Wood Rat, found generally through the southern and western part of the United States, occurs here. It builds large nests of twigs and grass which reach the height of three feet. It lacks the mean look which is characteristic of the common Norwegian Rat. Many quaint stories are told of it, for it has the thieving instincts of a Jackdaw and often enters human habitations in isolated districts to steal such useless articles as bright buttons or metal trinkets. The Little Harvest Mouse, having the appearance of a house mouse

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about two and a half inches long, can be found in the fields. The White-footed Mouse, numbering about seventy North American species, has a representative in this valley. It is usually found in brush and timber. Its diet is weed and grass seed. Of course the domestic rat and mouse infest many households just as they do in other sections of the country. Dr. Hornaday of the New York Zoological Gardens called the Common Rat "the meanest animal in the world," an opinion that will be concurred in by most. Like the Ground Squirrel it is open to the charge of carrying the bubonic plague.

In the creek beds a small, blue-bellied lizard may be seen sunning itself upon the rocks and gravel. Because of the color of its abdomen superstitious people have called it poisonous, whereas there is only one poisonous specie of lizard in the United States. This is the Gila monster of Texas which does not range into California. The blue-bellied reptile of poisonous repute, or Fence Lizard, feeds on insects only and is not in any way harmful. It is extremely agile and swift in its movements and for these reasons very difficult to catch. The few people who do capture it usually grasp it by the tail and are astonished to find themselves left holding that appendage while its four legs carry their abbreviated quarry off to a shelter in the rocks. In common with many reptiles this beast possesses the power of losing a section of its tail without

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harm to itself.

In the mountains is found the Skunk. It also inhabits more isolated valley districts. It is of course notorious for its extremely offensive defense mechanism which consists of gassing an intruder from two small glands located under the tail until whatever belligerent ideas he might have entertained are effectually squelched. Skunks are carnivorous and fond of poultry, but they are not so numerous here as to constitute a pest. Since the disappearance of other fur-bearing animals their furs have become valuable, the white parts of it being dyed black before its sale.

Badgers are said to inhabit the hills but people who have actually seen them are rare. They are broad, flat, short-legged animals who seem to nourish a constant grudge against the world. Their food consists of Ground Squirrels and other ground game. They are burrowing animals and is said often to live in deserts where no other carnivorous animal could exist upon the small amount of food to be found.

The Oregon Mole has a coat of soft dark grey fur which has the shimmer of satin. It is about 6/1-4th inches long with a naked tail which adds 1/3-4th inches. The nest is built about 2 feet below the ground and is lined with soft grass. The eye is only a dark spot of pigment beneath the skin useful for distinguishing light and dark.

Shrews are occasionally uncovered in damp litter in the hills.

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The Gopher Snake is plentifully distributed in Santa Clara County. It is found wherever its natural prey occurs and that is everywhere, for it lives upon small rodents and amphibians. It reaches a good size; specimens have often been killed measuring over a yard in length. The ground color of its scales is yellowish with darker markings spread along the back. It is perfectly harmless to man.

Another reptile, this time one not so harmless but fortunately not frequently seen, is the Pacific Rattlesnake. This animal gives birth to live young, sometimes as many as fourteen at a time, each being inclosed in a separate, transparent sack which bursts upon being exposed to the air. The young are ready to strike and kill as soon as born, requiring no further development of their poison fangs or sacs. This rattler is notorious for the length of its fangs, injecting its poison much deeper into the flesh than most of the poisonous snakes of North America. Contrary to popular belief, it does not seek men or large animals to bite out of a spirit of pure meanness. Rather, it avoids unnecessary killing when afraid of being stepped on or injured by a possible enemy or when in pursuit of its prey, small mammals and birds. These snakes swim and climb well but usually avoid water unless it is necessary for them to take a course through it to reach a new hunting ground or avoid a foe such as the blacksnake, a boa, which is cannibalistic.

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A Garter Snake inhabits the higher mountains. It is sometimes a spotted rather than striped variety.

A lizard, belonging to the Iguana family, is rather common. This is the Horned Toad, commonly credited by schoolboys with a capacity to shoot blood from its eyes. This superstition has a certain basis in fact, for, when irritated or in fear of its life, the capillaries around the eyeball are distended until they burst, allowing red tears to drip out. This reptile is a fearsome-looking little beast, spiked all over, and with a head which one author has likened to that of a Chinese dragon. Despite its forbidding appearance it is perfectly harmless and may be handled with impunity. It is insectivorous in its habits and captures its prey by darting out a long, sticky tongue at it, which recoils, with the victim securely glued upon the end, into the hawk-like mouth of the hunter.

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